

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE FREE FACULTY OF PROTESTANT THEOLOGY, PARIS,
AND PUBLICLY MAINTAINED THE 3^d OF MARCH 1914

AT 2 P. M.

To obtain the degree of licencié in theology

BY

The Rev. Marc BOEGNER, B. A., Lic. L.

Professor of Theology

In the Evangelical Missionary house, Paris

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Examiners into the defence :

Prof. J. MONNIER, D. D., in the chair.

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Prof. W. MONOD, D. D. } Examiners.

*The Faculty does neither approve nor disapprove the opinions
proper to the candidate*

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THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The teaching I have been giving for two years and a half to the students of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society has led me to study the problems arising from the growth of missionary work in the non-christian world. I had particular occasion to take account of the great difficulties which hinder the evangelization of the world, because the Christian forces present themselves to the heathen in a state of division and even of hostility to each other. In all that concerns either the power of the Christian message, or a more adequate occupation of the field, or the growth of native churches, or a quicker and more efficient use of resources in men and money, — the divisions of Christendom are always a cause of weakness — if not a scandal which renders the noblest self-sacrifices barren.

It is therefore not surprising if the problem

of Church unity forces itself with growing strength upon the attention of missionaries in the field, of native churches, of missionary societies and, finally, of the churches at home, particularly those which have sprung from the Reformation. In fact, during the last few years, no problem has given rise to more serious discussions.

The movement for co-operation and unity, to which, in answer to the needs of the mission field, the World Missionary Conference (Edinburgh 1910) gave so great an impulse, found a strong response in a great part of Christendom, only because, at the same time, other factors tended to concentrate attention upon the problem of unity. The growing feeling of the responsibility of the Church of Christ in view of the spread of Islam, and of the powerlessness to which it is doomed by its divisions ; the dismay felt by the churches so separated before the nations of Europe and America which more and more are learning to think, to act, to organize themselves internationally ; the radical inefficiency of every apologetic system which does not rest on churches united in truth and love ; the matchless power, on the other hand, of such œcumenical organizations as the World's Student Christian Federation : such are the principal motives which, added to the cause pointed out above, compel the churches to wonder whether the

time has not come for them to consider how they may make possible the realization of Christ's prayer : « That they all may be one... » (St John 17 : 21).

But the problem of unity does not concern only the churches taken as a whole, but claims very specially the attention of theologians. Indeed it covers a whole series of exegetical, historical, psychological and doctrinal questions, the solution of which will be found, not in public discussions, but through the steady effort of the irenic thinkers of the various churches.

The following theses do not pretend to solve the problem of unity. Their only aim is, first, to show in the teaching and the action of Jesus, the foundation of Church unity, next to determine what must be understood by the term of unity, lastly to point out in which direction those theologians must look who think that while on the one hand true unity involves diversity of life, on the other every Christian church, if it would avoid the risk of mutilating the truth, ought to find means for taking possession of those spiritual riches which some other churches have been able to preserve through centuries till this day.

THESES

I

Unity is an essential and necessary characteristic of the Church of Jesus Christ.

As regards the biblical foundation of Unity

II

That unity is an essential characteristic of the Church is due to the very nature of the Gospel. Wherever the Gospel is preached, men come nearer one another and unite into a visible society. Man cannot find the Father without finding the brethren. The All-Fatherhood of God is a sufficient foundation for the unity of the Church.

III

The teaching of Jesus, in the synoptic Gospels, show that the growth of His work has an organic and dynamic character which does not allow of the co-existence of separated churches in competition with and enmity against each other (*see* Mk. 4 : 26-29, 30-32 ; Mt. 13 : 33 ; *see also* Mk. 3 : 24-25).

IV

The Apostolic College, which Jesus made the embryo of the new Israël, was, in its founder's thought, an organism ¹. The Church, virtually included in that organism, must have the same organic character. He who says organism says unity.

V

The words of the Gospel according to S^t John, chapt. 17 : 21, express definitely the will of Christ. These words show moreover that, in the eyes of the Christians of the apostolic age, the unity of the Church was the condition of its efficient action upon the world.

¹ See Eug. de Faye : *Etude sur les Origines des Eglises de l'Age apostolique*, pp. 103-126.

VI

For the Apostle Paul, the unity of the Church is an undeniable fact ; it is not to be created, it exists and must be maintained. It is a spiritual reality and cannot but become visibly manifest.

VII

The necessary characteristic of the unity of the Church is founded on Paul's teaching as a whole, and more particularly on his doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of the body of Christ (see I Cor. 10 : 17 ; 12 : 4-30 ; Coloss. 1 : 24-25 ; cf. Eph. 4 : 4-16).

*As regards the unity of the Church in the
apostolic age*

VIII

The local community, in the apostolic age, however independent it may have been from other communities, was not a particular church but a manifestation, an embodiment, in a definite spot, of the universal Church, the people of God, the new Israël. It is not the communities which constitute the Church. The Church is prior to them¹.

IX

In the apostolic age, the great diversity which existed between the local communities in matters of worship and organization, did not prevent the unity of the Church from being manifested in that the communities gave to each other the right hand of fellowship.

¹ See the criticism of Sohm's theory in Harnack : *Entstehung u. Entwicklung der Kirchenverfassung...*

X

Therefore the problem which forces itself upon the attention of the churches is not : how to create unity ? but : how to make it manifest ?

As regards the different kinds of unity

XI

The law of incarnation, which is the essential law in the spiritual world, requires a manifestation of the invisible unity of the members of Christ's body in a visible organism.

XII

The visible unity of the Church can only be conceived in three different ways :

either as a *uniformity* which involves the absorption by one church of all others ;

or as a *shapeless* unity which involves ecclesiastical and doctrinal indifference and confusion ;

or as an *organic* unity which, as in the case of every organism, involves a diversity of elements dependent upon each other.

XIII

Unity is incompatible with uniformity, for uniformity excludes spontaneity which is an essential attribute of life.

XIV

Every church which aspires to realize for itself only the unity of the Church lives apart from other churches and becomes a sect. Uniformity destroys catholicity.

XV

Diversity and liberty are conditions of true unity¹.

XVI

The *World's Evangelical Alliance* and similar movements are to be encouraged. Nevertheless it is most important to take care lest they result in the permanence of the divisions to which they desire to put an end.

¹ The Roman Church seems to have understood this principle when it must turn to its own account, as, for instance, in the case of *uniates*.

XVII

The union of the churches is not the unity of the Church. Union is man's work; unity comes from God. Union does not necessarily involve unity. Unity does involve union¹.

XVIII

The spirit of tolerance is not sufficient to create a visible manifestation of unity.

XIX

Unity presupposes love, and love longs for unity.

¹ Cf. Newman Smyth: *Passing Protestantism and Coming Catholicism*, part. III, and, p. 135, the remarks of Bishop Brewster of Connecticut.

*As regards the unity of the churches
of the Reformation*

XX

The principal creeds and declarations of faith of the churches sprung from the Reformation affirm unanimously their belief in the unity and catholicity of the body of Christ¹.

XXI

The churches of the Reformation did right in putting an end to confusion between the invisible Church and the visible, originated as early as the apostolic age. But by acknowledging the unity of the invisible Church

¹ See particularly : the Augsburg Confession (1530), the first Helvetic Confession (1536), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1562), the Scotch Confession of Faith (1560), the Westminster Confession (1647), the Confession of the Waldenses (1655), the Easter Litany of the Moravian Church (1749), the Confession of the English Baptists (1677), the Methodists Articles of Religion (1784), the Congregational Creeds and Declarations (Cambridge-Platform, 1648 ; Savoy Declaration, 1658). See the texts in Newman Smyth : *Common Idea of the Church in the Protestant Creeds* (*The Constructive Quarterly*, June 1913).

only, some of them have been unfaithful to the thought of Christ and the apostles.

XXII

All the protestant churches have bared their separate existence upon the right to break the unity of the Church in order to remain faithful to what founders considered to be the truth¹.

XXIII

It is unquestionable that the unlimited application of the protestant principle of the right of private judgment has created divisions and subdivisions the suppression of which is one of the first conditions of a manifestation of unity.

XXIV

Polemics must be succeeded by irenics. It is time for the latter to receive, in the range of theological studies, the place to which it is entitled.

¹ See Mc. Bee, *An Eirenic Itinerary*, p. 149.

XXV

The pressing task of irenic thinkers is to show that the different creeds and symbols of the churches of the Reformation assert their unity in the essential affirmations of faith.

XXVI

Protestant Churches have lost the sense of Church unity. It is most desirable that Christian preaching should tend to rouse in the soul the sense of catholicity without which the hope of the kingdom of God remains incomplete.

XXVII

It is to be expected that, when the churches of the Reformation shall have understood that the visible manifestation of Church unity is the condition of the world's conquest by the Gospel, they will see the uselessness of many of their divisions and will therefore bring them to an end.

XXVIII

Criticism and history make manifest the fictitious character of some separations, by giving a

more exact view of the growth of primitive christianity and of the churches' organization in the first centuries ; for instance by showing that a distinction must be made between the establishment of episcopacy and the various theories to which it gave rise and which were gradually identified with it.

XXIX

No essential affirmation of faith is contrary to a manifestation of the unity of Reformed Churches either by the mutual acknowledgment of their order or by their general acceptance of episcopal or presbyterian orders.

XXX

A manifestation of the unity of the churches sprung from the Reformation would not be sufficient to manifest the unity of the body of Christ.

As to the unity of the whole Christendom

XXXI

It is impossible to think that the Roman Church is doomed to disappear. It is conceivable that an internal reformation, ensuring the triumph of the Christian over the Roman element, will ultimately be accomplished in it.

XXXII

Neither the Roman Church, nor the Church of England, nor any of the Eastern or Protestant Churches, as they are to-day, could serve as the form of the visible unity of the Church of Christ.

XXXIII

Catholicism and Protestantism, studied in their rise and in their historical growth, manifest two fundamental tendencies of the human mind. These two tendencies have been represented as contradictory by man; in reality they are complementary.

XXXIV

The individual conscience is the one social cell which can give rise to social organisms fitted to live and to propagate life.

XXXV

The Christian must be protestant or he cannot exist.

The Church must be catholic or she cannot exist.

XXXVI

Protestantism is unable, by the application of its principles alone, to create enduring churches. When true to itself it can give rise nothing more than schools of prophets or of theologians.

XXXVII

The mighty protestant churches have developed themselves in opposition to the protestant principle of individual inspiration and according to the catholic principle of ecclesiastical and dogmatic authority.

XXXVIII

The interpretation, given by most protestant churches of the doctrine of universal priesthood, leads to hidden clericalism or to anarchy. It is contrary to the Pauline doctrine of the Holy Spirit which involves the plurality of *charismata*, and thence, also, the division of labour in a plurality of ministries and the habit of willing subordination.

XXXIX

Liberty does not exclude authority nor does authority exclude liberty. They are conditions depending upon one another. Where not resting on authority, liberty becomes license. Where not serving liberty, authority becomes despotism.

XL

The necessity of religious experience and the authority of tradition are not contradictory. Religious experience impoverishes itself as soon as it lives apart from the tradition sprung from

primitive religious experiences and which it ought, in its turn, to enlarge ¹.

XLI

The same may be said of the prophetic order and of the priesthood. The history of Israël and the history of Christianity show that the prophetic order can only do lasting work if it inspires and vivifies the priesthood.

XLII

Human civilizations pass through three stages : the stage of communism in which the group alone exists ; the stage of individualism in which the individual affirms himself as against the group ; the stage of co-operation in which the individual attains his aim in the willing association with others ².

¹ See Henri Bois : *L'Expérience religieuse individuelle et la tradition* (FOI ET VIE, 1st and 15 Sept. 1909).

² See T. Fallot : *Le Livre de l'Action bonne* (3^d édit., Paris, Fischbacher, 1913), introduction.

XLIII

Roman Catholicism corresponds with the first stage of human civilization ; protestant individualism with the second. With the third stage will correspond the true Catholicism which shall unite, in higher synthesis, the principles hitherto opposed.

XLIV

« Liberty being nothing but a means, as Vinet has rightly said, Protestantism also is nothing but a means. One does not separate himself simply for the sake of separation... One separates to unite again. Individualism must lead to socialism, Protestantism to Catholicism, liberty to unity¹. »

XLV

The duty of evangelical theologians and Christians is to inquire whether the often reprehensible practices of the Roman Church have

¹ *Nouvelles Études évangéliques*, p. 320 (2^d édit., Paris, 1862).

not their origin in psychological truths, the comprehension of which would enable Protestant Churches to satisfy more adequately the deepest wants of the human soul.

XLVI

It is neither possible nor desirable to point out ways and means by which the unity of the body of Christ will be manifested in the future. What does matter is that unity be acknowledged as the constructive principle of the Church.

It should not have been expedient, in these theses, to state the *religious* conditions of a visible manifestation of Church unity, but it is necessary to say that these conditions are essential. In order to solve the problem of unity, it would not suffice that the theologians of the various churches should agree on solutions demanded by the different problems of which I have spoken. Nor would it suffice that diplomatic agreements should be concluded between particular churches. First and foremost all churches must become conscious of their respective sins against truth and love, confess them, pass through the grief of repentance, and become willing to decrease in order that the Church may increase. Unity is a splendid flower which can only blossom in an atmosphere of humility and love. But to create that atmosphere does not concern irenic thinkers alone ; it concerns all who in all churches have the vision of the boundless tasks which Christ has intrusted

to His disciples and which they can only achieve when they become *one* body, penetrated by *one* Spirit, in the service of *one* Lord, witnessing to the world which they desire to save.

Duly examined,
The Chairman :
Jean MONNIER.

Duly examined, the Dean :
Ed. VAUCHER.



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